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Chemical industry, the environment, and russian provincial society: The case of the kokshan chemical works (1850-1925)

Kazan Federal University, 420008, Kremlevskaya 18, Kazan, Russia

Abstract

© Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry 2018. This article explores interactions between the chemical industry, the environment, and Russian provincial society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, using the example of the Kokshan chemical works, in the Elabuga District, Viatka Province, Russian Empire (today Mendelevsk District, Republic of Tatarstan, Russian Federation). The plant's location facilitated its rapid development due to a number of factors, including a cheap labour force, the availability of raw materials, and the absence of local competition. However, the factory's development came in conjunction with the deterioration of the environment and subsequent health problems for employees and the surrounding population. Conflicts connected with the Kokshan works illustrate differences between this case and similar examples in Russia and Europe. In Viatka Province, the local community remained mostly silent regarding these issues, and made no demands for improving sanitary control and working conditions or reducing pollution; rather, it was distant activists who personally suffered no harm who intervened in the interest of social justice. The history of the company reflects the contrast between the transfer of European technological innovations to Russia and laborious efforts to increase national wealth on the one hand, and the exploitation of the environment and endangerment of workers' health on the other.

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